FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE SPECIFIC
Communion Meditation
Luke 4:14-30
February 16, 1975

John McCormick Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

William Muehl, Professor at Yale Divinity School, tells a story about visiting a very old Colonial house near New Haven. The feel of history was in every room, and the experience was enhanced by the fact that he was guided by the last surviving decendant of the original owner, an elderly lady.

See Front

As he walked through the house he could imagine those gallant people who lived and ate and slept there in [redacted]. He noticed a particularly striking musket hanging above the fireplace, and as he reached to take it down, the old woman stopped him. "Please don't touch it. It's loaded and might go off." He raised a quizzical eyebrow and she explained that her great, great, great grandfather had loaded the gun and placed it there for the day he would use it in the cause of freedom.

Muehl voiced the logical assumption that the man had died before the revolution. "No", she said, "he lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817". She added, "He just never seemed able to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington's revolt."

Muehl speculates about the old gentleman: how he imagined himself a brave and romantic revolutionary, fighting shoulder to shoulder with his compatriots in the cause of liberty. He imagines him sitting before the fire, gazing up at the loaded weapon, dreaming about revolution in the abstract.

But when it happened: when the abstract became specific, it did not resemble his lofty expectations. One April morning his neighbors probably gathered in the road in front of his house, dressed in the rough garb of farming, carryring an odd assortment of none too effecient weapons. And the call was not at all what he had dreamed. Rather it probably sounded like this: ("Get your gun, neighbor. There's been a scrap over at Concord. Let's go!")

And so the gun remained on the wall - because the abstract had become specific, and in the transition had lost a lot of what had seemed clear and compelling and inspiring. (All the Damned Angels, p 52-53)

That is true about a lot of life. In the abstract we conceive brilliantly: and often our abstractions fail to live up to our expectations when they become specifics. It is true also of words we use commonly. "Peace", "Brotherhood", "Freedom". No one is opposed to the concepts, but the actuality, the persons, and movements the abstract notions become are not nearly as universally appealing. A ~~special~~ television ~~presentation~~ program last week ~~on~~ about Abraham Lincoln illustrated the contrast. We have almost made an abstraction out of Lincoln, a saint, a deity in our pantheon of national gods. The excellence of the program was ~~in making him real~~ that he was portrayed realistically, a specific man who was not nearly as attractive as our portraits and who deep and common wisdom was not nearly as obvious to his peers as was his pro pensity for telling crude stories at very proper parties.

1A

+celebrated

How much safer to think about "the poor" than that particular man.

There is safety in the abstract: the lead editorial in the New York Times last Sunday warned against the danger of thinking about categories of people rather than persons. But probably nowhere in life are we so inclined to be abstract as we are in our religion. It seems that we

I can remember the first time I saw New York City. My parents had told me about the skyscrapers, and in my imagination I saw them reaching to the sky - so high the tops could barely be seen. But when I actually saw them - I was disappointed and I learned that hard lesson that the abstraction often fails to live up to its billing when we get down to specifics.

There are plenty of illustrations. One of the greatest problems in marriage, for instance, is that the specific is different - at least - from the abstraction. If we use magazines, television, books and movies as our model we will come up with a mental picture of marital bliss - roses - sweetness - neat homes - pleasant people, untroubled and always affectionate. But the specific is not like that. And into every minister's office come people a year or two after the ceremony saying - "I wasn't ready for this!"

The same prinicple applies to words we use commonly. "Peace - brotherhood - freedom." No one is opposed to them - everyone is for them. But peace - as a concept - an idea is one thing. The actuality - living in peace with other nations - is often difficult. So it is with brotherhood - we're all for it - in the abstract. But when it comes at us in the form of that person - that group - that race - some of us back away, as fast as we can. And freedom - who isn't for it - in the abstract? The going gets a little sticky, however, in the specific - when one man's freedom, for instance, limits the freedom of another man.

Particularly when we are dealing with people, this inclination to remain abstract surfaces. It's safer, for instance, to discuss the "poor" - as an abstraction, than to come to grips with that man - or that woman. In fact, that is exactly the way most of us respond - making blanket statements about an abstraction - "They're lazy - they're no good" - because it's a whole lot easier than seeing people as specific individuals.

But probably no where in life are we as inclined to be abstract as we are in our religion.

It seems that we have a need to keep God at arm's length; to disguise him in dogma and wordy doctrine; to be as abstract as possible and to become most uncomfortable when safe theological abstractions begin to get personal and specific.

For centuries the Jews had longed for a Messiah

the corporate hope + longing for God's Messiah

That is precisely what happened one day in Nazareth. The abstract messianic expectations of Israel became very specific in the form of a man by the name of Jesus. It was at the beginning of His public ministry. He had been teaching throughout Galilee and finally came to the town of Nazareth where He had lived as a boy. It was the Sabbath and He joined His old friends and relatives in the Synagogue.

He was invited to read from the prophets and to comment on the passage. It was the custom to extend such an invitation to visiting rabbies or teachers. And He chose a very significant passage - Isiah 61 - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable Year of the Lord."

That was a very important passage of scripture in 30 A. D. It had been a century since Roman occupation and oppression had begun and messianic fervor was running at a high pitch. The people of Galilee saw themselves in the words of the prophet: they were the poor, the captives, the oppressed. And they were very fond of the abstract generalities regarding their hopes for the future.

-patriotism - hope for a deliverer

And so an electric shock went through the congregation as he rolled up

the scroll, sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". Slowly, it became clear that the lofty ~~messianic~~ hope dream, the centuries-old abstraction was being claimed by this very specific man sitting in front of them. "Joseph's son - Jesus, the carpenter!"

The gentle people of Nazareth became a lynch mob. They threw Him unceremoniously out of the city and would have killed Him on the spot. The messiah must be high and holy -He must be a mighty warrior - he must look and act like Elijah - he cannot look like this. he must be like David or Moses

This story, occuring at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is a preface to all that follows. As the story unfolds Jesus keeps getting more and more specific and the people keep getting more and more angry. At the end, as he is stretched out on a cross before their very eyes, the people who were thrilled by prophetic abstractions about the suffering servant spat on the specific man who was suffering for them.

Abstractions inspire: but the incarnation disturbed people. The concept of a Messiah was very popular, but Jesus Christ infuriated them.

And so Lent - the season of the year in which we are forced by the details of our Lord's passion to be uncomfortably specific. I invite you to begin that journey today: to confront the implications of a God who refuses to remain an abstraction, a God who will not be a safe philosophic concept: A God who loves us ~~as we are - not in the abstract~~ not in theory - but as we are, where we are. I invite you to begin today to refine whatever theological constructions you call your own - and contemplate a man who lived your life and died your death. → to 4A

We, begin, together, at a specific place - His table. There are no abstractions here: just bread and wine, standing for a specific body that was broken and blood shed - not at all for an idea, but for you and for me.

Amen

That is the message of Lent. There are times to contemplate the birth of Jesus: times to think about his teachings. But Lent is the time to move from the ~~abstract~~ idea of a God up there somewhere - to the man Jesus - the specific man who lived life as we do: who suffered and died for us - a very specific death. And, may I suggest, Lent is the time to become specific about that in your life. (*)

He died for you - not an abstraction - but you, with all your failings, and eccentricities - all your struggles and weakness. He cares about you - your family - your life - your work. And he wants you to follow him - just where you are.

In one of his last acts - he sat with his disciples around a table. And he took two specific things - bread and wine - and shared them. There were no abstractions that night: just bread and wine, standing for a specific body that was broken and blood shed - not at all for an idea, a philosophy - but for you and for me. Remember that today - as you return to your work - as you touch the common things of life pencil - paper - tools - the bread of the evening meal. — God's love in J.C. is that specific. And he died for me. Amen.

(#) You don't have to respond or do anything about fairy tales. Cinderella - Peter and the Wolf - can remain harmless abstractions. But you can't do that with the Gospel.

Our Father, it is easier to discuss what we believe about you than it is to confront what you have done for us. In this Lenten season, as we turn our thoughts to the passion of our Lord, help us - once again - to know the mystery of your love for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

4th - 9:00